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*Hayden Bed*

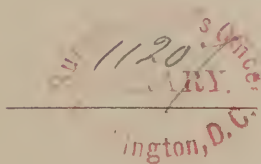
# BOARDS OF HEALTH.

BY

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READ AT THE MEETING OF THE "BOSTON SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE,"

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## BOARDS OF HEALTH.

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As in all ages, and by all men, LIFE has been considered the most precious of human endowments; and, as the loss of it has been held to be the greatest possible calamity; an entirely healthy life, that is to say, "a sound mind in a sound body," ought to be accounted as the most perfect condition of humanity.

Waiving all technical physiological considerations, it is the more direct business of Sanitary, as a department of Social Science, to consider and apply to the maintenance of human life, in its integrity, the great elements supplied by Nature for this purpose.

The study then of these agencies, as found in Nature, and unmodified; or, as modified or applied by art: may be properly considered to be at the basis of all the social sciences; and to be an essential ingredient in all plans having regard to human life.

Although all masses are composed of individuals, and there can be no number of which the unit is not an integral part; it is the more especial province of sanitary science to consider men *en masse*, rather than as individuals; and not to take up these questions for practical action, until society itself has become chrystallized into groups of greater or less magnitude, by an aggregation of its component parts.

It will be seen then, that the most important fields for the cultivation of sanitary science, and the application of its principles, are those parts of populous places in which are assembled, and where are found to be habitually living, with the usual accompaniments of scanty means of subsistence, the largest number of individuals, in the smallest possible amount of ground and air-space.

Sanitary science deals with human life, in the first place, as a simple FACT. It counts the number of births in a given community, and, comparing them with the deaths, estimates the net gain to the population.

Next: It examines into the causes of the deterioration and destruction of human life; and contrives means and measures to avert, ameliorate, or postpone them; and

Lastly: It brings within its purview, and recognizes as among its most appropriate functions, the duty of providing for the masses of the people the means of enjoying, to the fullest extent and for the longest possible time, that gift of life, which increases in value in a direct ratio, as it is multiplied by the number of times one life is contained in the whole mass of lives.

The reverse of these propositions may be used to illustrate them, and perhaps, more distinctly.

With such ideas of the value of a single life to its possessor, to his individual friends, and to society; it is not surprising that a single death, especially one out of the usual course of nature, sometimes attracts the attention of a whole community.

If this single death be multiplied by a considerable number, say twenty or a hundred, in consequence of some unforeseen accident, as, for example, the explosion of a powder-magazine at Mobile, the falling of a factory-building at Lawrence, the burning of a theatre at Richmond, or a church in Mexico, this attention becomes intensified into sentiments of sympathy, grief, or of horror.

But if, in addition to, and aggravation of these calamities, they are brought home to our own immediate vicinity, and occur from some occult, unknown, and mysterious causes, these sentiments, which do themselves honor humanity, become exchanged for a panic which is often as senseless and selfish, as it is extensive and uncontrollable.

This we have often seen to be true of the great epidemic pestilences which have, from time to time, desolated the world.



But, except to medical men and sanitarians, the more constantly operating causes of death, which, because more silent and separated in their march, are more unnoticed, excite no such sentiments of dismay and horror, or even of anxiety or surprise; yet they are always, in the aggregate, quite as destructive of life. In the year 1849, the deaths by cholera were fewer than by consumption; and the whole number of deaths in Boston for three years, including the epidemic year, did not exceed the usual number.

Suppose it were announced to us, on some Monday morning, that, during the preceding week, there had been from ten to twenty deaths in Boston from secret poisoning, and that the cases were well-known to the police; and that this state of things should go on, from week to week, without arrest or discovery of the causes or criminals, through the year? Nothing could exceed the agitation and indignation of the community.

But there are from ten to twenty deaths a week in Boston, and at that rate throughout the year,—and by poison, too,—the poison of badly ventilated, badly drained, and over-crowded dwellings, and by the unfit food and pernicious drinks of which their inhabitants have partaken.

I think, then, I am within the strict bounds of truth, when I assert my belief that, between the night of March eighth, 1865, and to-night, there have been more than five hundred, perhaps a thousand, unnecessary and preventable deaths in this town; and, this number,—the slaughter of the innocents “of two years old, and under,” — which first shocked the ears of all the world, as inaugurated by Herod, — almost still finds its annual parallel in the records of our city register.

The fact that this destruction does not follow the visible stroke of the tyrant's sword, or the commendation to our lips of the cup of poison by the hand of an ever-ready Borgia, makes no difference in the result. It is only a question of time and place.

If “in *war* the real arbiter of the destinies of nations is not the sword, but pestilence,” how true is it that in peace Death hath his victories as well!

From the earliest times, certainly from those of the great law-giver, Moses, under whose sanitary code the priests exercised many of their appropriate functions as health-officers, these principles have been recognized, and boards of health have, in some form, existed. The temples of the ancients, dedicated to Hygeia; the separation of the leprous from his fellows; the operations of cleansing the persons and apparel of the sick; the embalming of the dead; all prove a recognition of the rights and duties of the governing class in relation to Hygienic matters over and towards the governed.

In later times, and under enlightened governments, these powers, exercised at first by individual rulers, have been conferred upon “Boards of Health,” or “Health Commissioners,” appointed for the purpose.

A consideration of some of the powers, duties, and functions proper to be conferred upon, and to be exercised by, Boards of Health, will make it very plain that these boards should be composed of “competent, discreet, and suitable persons,” and, when so composed, it is for the interest of the public that they should be invested with the highest authority.

These boards may be general or local,—centralized State boards, or local boards for cities, towns, or districts; and their duties will vary accordingly.

The duties of general boards of health may be briefly stated as follows, viz.:—

1. To consider and decide upon such sanitary questions as may be submitted to them by the State, or municipal authorities, or local boards of health.

2. To diffuse, by reports or otherwise, information to the inhabitants of the State on sanitary matters; and to aid, by suggestions, orders, or regulations, the various local boards.



3. To examine into the salubrity of the great institutions of the State; the safety of public buildings and factories; the security of life on railroads, &c., &c.

4. To collect and collate statistics relating to life and health; as to the modes of employment, and of living; and the comparative healthiness of different localities of the inhabitants.

5. To appoint suitable officers to carry out the plans of the board.

The duties and responsibilities of local boards of health, although of a more limited extent territorially, are not of any less importance in securing the safety and health of the people.

As an example which will illustrate and cover all the functions of inferior and smaller boards, let us take that of a populous sea-board city, — our own.

In the first place, it has been decided by a great many statistical facts and observations, that whenever the annual mortality of a city exceeds that of twenty-five to a thousand; *i. e.*, for Boston, say, five thousand deaths annually, it is greater than the average annual mortality to be expected from ordinary causes in temperate climates, and that the causes of it should be ascertained.

*Sanitary Survey.* — This is done by a SANITARY SURVEY, in which the Board of Health may, if in their discretion they think fit, cause public inquiry to be made as to the following matters and things, or any of them; that is to say, —

As to the sewerage, drainage, and water-supply.

As to the number and sanitary condition of the inhabitants.

As to the accumulation of filth.

As to any other matter of which the Board may require to be informed.

This survey is made in the manner following, to wit: —

A sufficient number of the regular police force, who act as inspecting health officers, is detailed for this service. But during an

epidemic season, or when any medical facts are to be obtained, the inspectors should be doctors or students of medicine.

Upon receiving his instructions, each officer commences and diligently prosecutes his inquiries; carefully noticing the state of the streets, lanes, courts, passages, common stairs, houses, rooms, cellars, yards, or vacant lots in his assigned district; reporting in detail, and in writing, all accumulations of filth; all cases where the waste-pipes, drains, &c., are foul or obstructed; all cases of prevailing sickness, especially where there is great overcrowding or unusual destitution; also all cases of dead bodies found in single living rooms.

When any nuisance or other source of disease is discovered, notice, in the proper form, is to be served upon the owners or occupants, forthwith to abate the same, and in case of refusal or neglect for a period specified, the Board causes the same to be abated or removed in the most summary manner.

These measures are so continuously pursued as to prevent, as far as possible, any re-accumulation of the causes of disease sought to be removed; and each officer is held strictly responsible for the sanitary condition of his assigned district.

*Sewerage.* — It is the duty of the Board to procure a map, which exhibits a system of sewerage for effectually draining the district; and, in general, to superintend and control the construction of all the sewers in it.

*Cleansing.* — All cleansing operations of the streets, courts, yards, &c., and the removal of ashes, swill, &c., are to be done under the direction of the Board.

It is also authorized to compel all owners and occupants of houses and tenants, and especially lodging and boarding-house keepers, to put and keep their premises in good order, and not to overcrowd them with tenants.

*Markets and Slaughter-Houses.* — No market or slaughter-house can be



used or occupied without the license of the Board; and the Board also takes cognizance of the character and quality of the food sold, or exposed for sale therein.

Under this head comes the inspection of milk, bread, and other articles which are delivered at other parts of the town.

The Board also takes cognizance, upon the same general ground, of all *unlicensed* dram-shops and drinking-houses.

*Quarantine and Epidemic and Contagious Diseases.*—The Board takes all such measures for the isolation and treatment of contagious and epidemic diseases, as are necessary to protect the inhabitants, whether the danger is interior, or is supposed to be imported by sea.

The theory of quarantines is based upon the assumption, that, by a complete isolation of all persons actually sick of diseases supposed to be contagious, as well as of those not sick, who, together with their effects, have been exposed to the causes of such sickness, the further spread of these diseases may be prevented, and their mischievous consequences confined within the charmed circle of a sanitary cordon.

It should be observed that this theory assumes also, that all the diseases against which quarantines are especially established are propagated by contagion *only*; a position which is controverted by the strongest and most abundant testimony. The simple fact, that epidemics and contagious diseases have, in spite of these attempts to imprison and destroy them, continued, with a vigorous and marvellous activity, to spread themselves from time to time, over every quarter of the habitable globe, amply proves it. What has been the effect of these endeavors? Precisely the reverse of what could be desired, but, at the same time, precisely what might have been expected. The poison of disease has been concentrated and accumulated, its malignant qualities intensified, its expansive power exalted, till, like impacted gunpowder, when the fire at last reaches it, the explosion is terrific in proportion to the strength of the materials which have been employed to confine it.

Although, therefore, it is evident that the old systems of quarantine must speedily give way before the progress of a more liberal, humane, and enlightened modern policy, still, for the purpose of carrying into effect sanitary measures for the dispersion and dilution of the accumulated material of malignant epidemics; for securing the advantages of temporary medical treatment on shore for those who cannot procure it for themselves; for the prophylactic treatment of those in whom the incubative period of disease, and its consequent power to re-establish itself in new localities, has not yet passed; it will continue to be the duty of boards of health to establish and maintain proper hospitals at desirable quarantine grounds, as well as in the city itself.

*The Water Supply and Pleasure Grounds*, and provisions for public baths.

*Interment of the Dead.*—In order that no surreptitious burial shall take place, the Board requires distinct and positive information of the circumstances of every death; and sees to the decent and economical conduct of funerals.

*Executive Officers.*—It selects and appoints all the officers necessary to carry out the regulations of the Board.

\* With these important and multifarious duties, it is evident that boards of health require to be constituted in a manner which shall combine talents and capacities of a very varied character; thus there should be,—

1. Some medical men and sanitary experts.
2. A Registrar to collect the facts on which the board may act.
3. An engineer or surveyor, to give the plans, elevations grades, &c., necessary in the construction of the various works.
4. A lawyer or solicitor, whose functions are so obvious that it is not necessary to specify them; but his presence will always be required to protect and save the rights of all parties.

The officers to be appointed by the Board would be,—



1. An executive or medical health officer, who must be, of course, a *physician*.

2. Superintendents of cleaning, drains, &c.

All of whom are to be under the direction, and to act under the responsibility, of the board.

Boards of health, under the laws of this Commonwealth, ~~cannot~~ now be properly constituted; the ~~present~~ *former* statute making the *selectmen* in towns, and the *aldermen* in cities, *ex-officiis*, Boards of Health.

I think it will be admitted that a board so composed cannot in the nature of things, be a proper Board. To this, there can be few exceptions, — fortunately we have had one in our principal cholera epidemic, in the case of the Chairman of the Internal Health Committee, Mr. Henry B. Rogers.

They are not experts. They know only at second-hand any thing of sanitary laws. It is most important that the members of boards of health should themselves be familiar with the necessity for, and the grounds of action in regard to matters in which they are called upon to legislate.

They should, as they cannot now do, be able to foresee the coming evils, and, — like a prudent and intelligent shipmaster, who, after consulting his barometer and the wind's course, seasonably takes in sail, and prepares for the storm, — by early *preventive* measures, prepare for the pestilential blast.

Upon a board properly constituted, the whole community would rely with the utmost confidence. Such a board — by its wise counsel, its steady-handed and seasonable measures, and that calmness and courage which an intelligent confidence, and a knowledge of their ability to comprehend and to face the threatened emergency always confer on their possessors — would stand, like the priests of old, between the pestilence and the people.

The whole subject is now before a committee of the Legislature, and a bill, the principal provisions of which I read, has been prepared, which, if passed in its present form, will go far to remedy the evils of which we complain. If, however, a General State Board of Health could be established, the work would be more thoroughly done.

The bill is entitled,—

*“An Act in addition to existing Acts for promoting the Public Health.”*

SECTION 1. The corporate authorities of the various cities and towns of this Commonwealth are hereby authorized and empowered to establish Local Boards of Health, and to enact and enforce, generally and severally, such laws, ordinances, and regulations as they may deem expedient or necessary for promoting the sanitary condition of the said cities and towns, and as are not inconsistent with the Constitution and laws of the State.

SECT. 2. The said Local Boards shall, in all cases be so constituted that, at least, one-third of their members shall be Doctors of Medicine, and that there shall be upon each Board, also, at least one lawyer, one engineer, and one registrar.

SECT. 3. The said Local Boards of Health are also empowered when they may deem it expedient, to delegate to duly authorized agents, not exceeding two in number, and who shall be directly responsible to them, such powers as are necessary to the convenient exercise of the said laws and regulations.

SECT. 4. All expenses which shall be incurred by order of Boards of Health in the abatement of any nuisance, may be recovered of the owner or tenants of the real estate on which such nuisance existed, and shall also constitute a lien upon such real estate for two years after said expenses shall be incurred; and said lien may be enforced in the same manner as liens for taxes on real estate are enforced.

SECT. 5. Full compensation shall be made to all persons who shall sustain any damage by reason of the exercise of the powers of this act.”

Upon the action of the Legislature, and upon the revision of the boards, so as to place the administration of these important and vital interests in competent hands, every thing depends.

New York has done a noble deed in the recent passage of a thorough-going Health Act,—one which strikes at the root of the corruption and incapacity under which her splendid metropolis has so long suffered; and we are likely, unless some radical action is soon had here, to

be left as far behind her in sanitary law as we have been hitherto in advance of her.

Upon our lawgivers rests the responsibility of saying whether the Boards of Health of this and other places shall be so constituted as that no more lives shall be unnecessarily sacrificed to the dangers of the present imperfect systems, or whether we shall be able to congratulate ourselves on an advancement in the science of humanity, upon the plans so long since successfully adopted in Great Britain.

Finally and practically the question is, if in Boston, there shall be, for the future, *five hundred lives annually lost for the want of, or saved by reason of*, APPROPRIATE LEGISLATION.







